

## *Factors for Stream Entry*

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There's a passage where the Buddha describes three ways of gaining discernment. You gain discernment through listening, through thinking, and through meditating. I saw a TV show recently, a French TV show on the Dhamma, and they spent the entire fifteen minutes just getting those three points across. But the important factor is that not just any kind of listening or any thinking or any meditation is going to give rise to discernment.

This is where another list of teachings comes in: the factors for stream entry. The name of the list may sound a little exalted, and you might not feel quite ready for stream entry yet, but the four factors in the list are really important for every meditator, regardless of where you are on the path and how close you are to awakening. These factors give you an idea of who and what to listen to, how to think, and how to meditate.

The *who* to listen to is defined in the factor of associating with admirable friends or people of integrity—in other words, people who exemplify the Dhamma in their practice, in their daily behavior.

The Buddha lists four qualities these people should exemplify: conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment. Those are the qualities you should look for in someone you want to study from. If they don't have conviction in the Buddha's awakening, you don't know what they have conviction in: something, someplace else. If they're not virtuous, you can't trust that you're safe around them. If they're not generous, you always wonder what they're trying to get out of you. And if they're not really discerning, you wonder why you're even there. So you want to look for these four qualities.

Conviction in the Buddha's awakening is basically conviction in the principle of karma: that it's through our efforts that we shape our experience—and we can learn how to do it in a skillful way, all the way to the end of suffering. One of the big misunderstandings about karma is the idea that everything you experience in the present moment can be traced back to past actions, but then you can take this present moment and make choices about it whose results move on to the future. There's a problem with that right there. If everything you're experiencing right now is a result of past actions, how can you make any choices about where you're going to go, because even your choices will be forced on you by past actions.

This is one of the really intriguing parts of the Buddha's teachings: that what you're experiencing right now is the result not only of past actions, but also of

things you're doing right now. This element of present karma right here is really important. This is why we meditate: to get that present element under control, to explore what freedoms we have in the present moment and how to use them best.

So that's the kind of person you're looking for: someone who has faith in the principle that we are free to choose, and that our choices shape our life and have an impact on other people. This is one of the reasons why meditation is not a selfish endeavor. If your mind is a mess, it's going to be a mess for other people, too. If your mind is straightened out, at the very least, you'll be a lot less of a burden on others.

You notice sometimes as people get older, they suddenly reach a point where you can't get to them anymore. They're in their world—maybe because they're too sick; maybe because something is going wrong inside their brains. You stop and reflect to think that this could happen to you. What would you want to have with you when you're stuck in your own little world like that? At the very least, you'd want a well-trained mind. That way, you'd be a lot less of a burden on other people. So you want to associate with people who can teach you about action from experience as to what's skillful and what's not.

That gets into the next factor, the *what* you listen to: You listen to the true Dhamma. The Buddha gives you various tests for what counts as true Dhamma. When you put it into action, what does it lead to? That's the big test. Then there are the details: There are the tests that the Buddha taught to the Kalamas. There are the tests that he taught to Gotami—in other words, looking at the impact that the Dhamma has on the people around you as you practice. If it's creating burdens for them, then there's something wrong. If it gets you entangled with other people, there's something wrong with it.

Look also at the qualities of mind you're developing. If it leads you to want to be well known, if it leads you to want to be discontented with what you've got, there's something wrong with that Dhamma.

And you look at where it's headed. Is it going to lead to dispassion? Or is it going to lead to more passion? Is it going to lead to being unfettered? Or is it going to lead to be tied down with more fetters?

In other words, you know the true Dhamma by: one, seeing how the person who teaches it behaves. Then, two, look at what happens when you take that person's Dhamma and put it to use in your own life. As the Buddha asked one time, "What are you becoming as day and nights fly past, fly past?" You want to listen to a Dhamma that would lead you to be able to give the Buddha a good answer to that question.

Once you've learned the Dhamma, the next step is to figure out, "How do I use this to put an end to suffering?" That's the third factor for stream entry, which is appropriate attention: the factor on how to think. It basically comes down to thinking in terms of the four noble truths, trying to figure out, "Where is the stress here? What is the stress?" The Buddha identifies it as clinging to the five aggregates. What are the aggregates? What is clinging? You want to explore that. You want to comprehend what's going on as you're doing it, because all too often when we're suffering in one area or another, we're not looking at things in terms of the aggregates. We're just moaning about how much we're suffering. All we can think about is how we want to get rid of it. As the Buddha says, you've got to comprehend it. To comprehend it, you have to take it apart into these various elements, to figure out where the clinging is—where you're feeding on things, basically.

As for the path, that's something you want to develop. This, too, is an aspect of appropriate attention: figuring out how you're going to develop right concentration, right view, all the right factors of the path; how to recognize them when they're there, how to develop them, and when they're not there, how to give rise to them. Appropriate attention isn't just about dividing things into four noble truths; it's also about trying to figure out how to get engaged in the duties appropriate to them.

Finally, the fourth factor of stream entry is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, which basically means practicing for the sake of disenchantment and dispassion. This is the factor that tells you how to meditate. You're trying to work on developing right concentration. Feed the mind with right concentration, so that when you look at the other ways you've been feeding it all along, you can begin to see: "This is an area that's unskillful, and I'd be better off not feeding there. Not only would I be better off, but the people around me would be better off, too." As long as you feel the need to feed on something, either physically or emotionally, you're not going to want to see the drawbacks of that thing because, after all, it's your survival.

But if you provide the mind with another source of nourishment inside—as we're doing when we meditate—it puts you in a better position. You can look back on the things you used to snack on and you begin to realize they're not really worth it. You're not hungry for that kind of food anymore. That's how you meditate so as to give rise to discernment.

We're aiming at dispassion. We're aiming at disenchantment. It may not sound attractive, but the reward that comes is when you give up your old feeding habits and learn new feeding habits as you strengthen the mind to a point where it

doesn't need to feed anymore: That's where things really get good, because as long as you need to feed, you're tied down to your food source. You can't wander around as much as you like. It is said that the arahants have a range that nobody can trace. That's because they don't leave crumbs behind. They're not feeding on anything. You can't see their chew marks on anything.

So that's the result of discernment. How you develop it, as I said, is not just through listening in general, but trying to find people who really are admirable friends and then listening to the true Dhamma from them.

It's not just thinking. It's learning how to think in terms of appropriate attention: the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them.

And it's not just any meditating. You can read about meditation courses where they're going to get you to feel a sense of Oneness and then to learn how to enjoy that Oneness or whatever. But the meditation that the Buddha's talking about is the meditation that's practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, for the sake of dispassion.

Are you learning how to develop a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for your old feeding habits? Are you learning how to feed the mind with the well-being that comes from concentration, learning how to feed the mind with the sense of relief that comes when you see, "I've been holding onto this, clinging to that, and I don't need to do that anymore."

That's what good about discernment: It gives you freedom. So look carefully at how you develop it, because there are all different kinds of discernment, all different kinds of wisdom. The discernment the Buddha's talking about is one that gives you freedom that you just can't even imagine.

And, as he said, this freedom: If you could ever make a deal that they would spear you with a hundred spears in the morning and a hundred spears at noon and a hundred spears in the evening—three hundred spears a day— and do this for a hundred years, but you could have the guarantee that, at the end of that hundred years, that you would gain awakening, then it would be well worth the deal. And you wouldn't feel that you'd gained awakening through pain and suffering. You gained awakening through joy. It's that good.